A DISCOURSE ON NATURAL RELIGION,

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DELIVERED IN THE

Chapel of Harvard University,

IN *CAMBRIDGE*,

SEPTEMBER 4th, 1799.

At the LECTURE

FOUNDED BY THE

Hon. Paul Dudley, Esq.

By JOHN MELLEN, jun.
Paſtor of the Eaſt Church in *Barnſtable*.

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ACTS xvii. 27.

—"THAT THEY SHOULD SEEK THE LORD, IF HAPLY THEY MIGHT FEEL AFTER HIM, AND FIND HIM."

THESE words are a part of Saint Paul's diſcourſe, before the high court of Areopagus, at Athens; a city which he had obſerved to abound with ſuperſtition and idolatry. It is not neceſſary that I ſhould trace the ſteps, by which the apoſtle of the Gentiles was led to appear before this celebrated court, and found this opportunity of defending the principles of true religion, before ſuch a learned and diſtinguiſhed audience. Nor ſhall I repeat the conjectures of commentators, relative to the ſingular inſcription on an Athenian altar, which the apoſtle had, previouſly, noticed, and which furniſhed him with ſo happy an introduction to his diſcourſe.

"Ye men of Athens, I perceive that you are, *in a peculiar degree, addicted to the worſhip of inviſible powers.* For, as I paſſed by and beheld your devotions, I found an altar, with this inſcription,—To THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom, therefore, ye ignorantly worſhip, him declare I unto you." I cannot more clearly exhibit the connexion of the text, than by continuing to recite the apoſtle's words. "God, that made the worlds, and all things therein, ſeeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; neither is worſhipped with men's hands as though he needed any thing, ſeeing he giveth to all life, breath, and all things; and hath made, of one blood, all nations of men, for to dwell on all the

the face of the earth; and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; that they ſhould ſeek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us." The meaning of the apoſtle is obviouſly this,—that the creating power, and governing providence of God, with all his diſpenſations towards mankind, centre in this great and important end, that, inſtructed hereby, they ſhould be led to ſeek the Lord their Maker, if poſſibly, amidſt all the darkneſs in which they are involved, they might ſucceſsfully ſearch after his nature, character, and laws, and be ſo happy as to obtain a laſting intereſt in his favour.

The following things appear to be implied in the text, viz. That the knowledge of God is eſſential to religion, and lies in the foundation of it.—That it is poſſible for men to find God, by properly obſerving, and reaſoning upon, his works and ways.—And, that there is ſuch a degree of difficulty attending this inquiry, and ſo much darkneſs ſurrounding the ſubject, as to leave it doubtful, whether mankind would, in fact, generally purſue it to a ſucceſsful iſſue.

The words will, therefore, furniſh ſuitable topics for a diſcourſe, the deſign of which, according to the directions of the Honourable Founder of this Lecture, is, to prove, explain, and ſhew the proper uſe and improvement of natural religion, as it is commonly called, and underſtood, by divines and learned men.

Religion, conſidered as a ſcience, conſiſts in the knowledge of God,—his being, and character, and thoſe laws of his, however made known, of which rational beings are the ſubjects, together with the probable conſequences of obedience, and of diſobedience to them.

Religion, conſidered as practical, conſiſts in the worſhip of God; or in our feeling all thoſe affections towards him, and paying him all thoſe reſpects, and

and all that obedience, which his character, his authority over us, and the relations in which he ſtands to us, demand.

In the idea of religion, conſidered either as ſpeculative or practical, the knowledge of God,—of a ſelf-exiſtent, ſupreme, all-governing power, is eſſentially included. To know, or comply with thoſe duties which reſult from our relations to each other, will not, of itſelf, conſtitute religion; though it conſtitutes one of the particulars which make up the general idea. Religious principle has reference to the authority and will of a ſupreme lawgiver. It contemplates mankind, not only as being variouſly connected with each other, but as derived from, and dependent upon, one common Father and Sovereign. Religion implies a conſciouſneſs of our being accountable, not merely to ourſelves, or to our fellow-men, but to a SUPERIOUR POWER, before whom we all ſtand on a level; the ſearcher of all hearts, and judge of all the earth.

A man may be prompted to right conduct by a regard to his own preſent intereſt; by the love of life, of peace, of reputation; or by a principle of honour, and even by reſpect to intrinſic fitneſs and propriety, and yet he may be deſtitute of religion. To be religious, he muſt, in the language of heatheniſm, *be a worſhipper of the Gods*; and, in the language of revelation, *fear God, and keep his commandments*.

Religion is divided into *natural*, and *revealed*, according to the different modes in which the knowledge of it is ſuppoſed to be acquired. By *natural religion*, as commonly underſtood, is intended ſo much acquaintance with God, our duty, and our deſtination, as might, in the proper uſe of our rational faculties, be acquired without any direct aſſiſtance from ſupernatural revelations.

By *revealed religion* we underſtand all that is taught, and enjoined by ſuch revelations. Theſe definitions

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are not, however, to be ſo underſtood, as to exclude the idea, that they may, in part, cover the ſame ſubjects; or that there may be ſome things common to natural and revealed religion. And this is, in fact, the caſe. The virtues of juſtice, truth, benevolence, and temperance, to which may be added piety, are taught and required by the religion of nature; at the ſame time they are ſtrongly inculcated, and by new and peculiar ſanctions enforced, in the book of revelation. The law of nature is the ground work of the law of Chriſt; and the leading deſign of all the diſpenſations of revealed religion has been, to bring men back to thoſe principles which are founded in reaſon, and the natural fitneſs of things. Although theſe are adopted into the chriſtian ſyſtem, and make an eſſential part of it, they are not, therefore, any the leſs, principles of natural religion.

In the propoſition, which we ſhall now attempt to prove, viz.—that there is ſuch a thing as natural religion,—it is implied, and intended, that religion is natural to man; or that there is a foundation, laid in his nature and conſtitution, for his being religious; and, that men are not only prediſpoſed to ſeek God, but that it is poſſible for them to find him, by properly obſerving, and reaſoning upon, his works and ways.

The foundation of religion is laid in that degree of reaſon and intelligence which was given to man. He is rendered capable of being religious, and diſpoſed for inquiring after God his Maker, by being, originally, taught more than the beaſts of the earth, and made wiſer than the fowls of heaven. It is not pretended that religious ideas, more than thoſe of any other kind, are born with us. But we are born with capacities for receiving them; which does not appear to be true of the inferiour creatures. Thus, man alone, of all the inhabitants of the earth, is a religious animal. He is prediſpoſed for acquiring the

the idea of a ſuperiour and inviſible power; he readily receives it when ſuggeſted; and it requires no inconſiderable efforts to diveſt himſelf of it, after it is once received. The ſame may be ſaid of the ideas of right and wrong. They are congenial to the human mind; they early find a place in it; and it is difficult, if poſſible, wholly to diſpoſſeſs them.

Need I appeal to any other authority than that of experience and obſervation, to prove that man is, naturally, endowed with a capacity and aptitude to diſcern the difference between moral good and evil, and a diſpoſition to approve the one, and diſapprove the other? To this capacity and diſpoſition ſome writers on morals have given the name of *moral ſenſe*. But, while this name is admitted as expreſſive, we ſhall do well to take heed, that we be not hence led to view moral qualities in the ſame light that the ſecondary qualities of bodies have been repreſented; that is, as exiſting only in the minds of thoſe who perceive them, and not as inherent in actions and diſpoſitions themſelves. We are not to underſtand the appellation as intimating that theſe qualities have no fixed nature, but fluctuate and change according to the opinions, views, and feelings, of intellectual beings; that they are any thing, or nothing, as the prevailing ſentiments of different nations, or different individuals, may make them. Certain diſpoſitions and modes of conduct are immutably right, and their contraries invariably wrong, in ſimilar circumſtances, at all times, in all places, and among all nations. In this ſenſe, it may be juſtly ſaid, there are *eternal fitneſſes* and *eternal truths*. Moral qualities are the ſame however we acquire the perception of them; whether by reaſoning, or in a more immediate and inſtinctive manner.

Without tracing the various accounts which have been given, by ethical writers, of the grounds of moral obligation, permit me to obſerve, that the foundation

foundation of it muſt be conſidered as laid in the nature of things, or the tendencies of different actions, and affections of mind. Thus it ought to be conſidered, even while it is allowed that the will of the Deity is the ſource of obligation, in the more ſtrict ſenſe of the word, and, to us, the ſureſt teſt of right and wrong. For we ſhall be very far from honouring the Supreme Being if we ſuppoſe his will is, ſtrictly ſpeaking, arbitrary, or that there is no reaſon for his requiring one mode of conduct, in his rational creatures, rather than another. When we ſpeak of the tendency of actions, this tendency muſt be conſidered as having reference to ſome end. When we ſay that any particular action is *good*, we muſt mean, that it is good for *ſome reaſon*, or *to ſome purpoſe*. And, even when we vary our language, and ſay of the ſame action, that it is, *abſolutely and in itſelf, right*,—we do not, if indeed it be poſſible that we ſhould, exclude the idea of this rectitude having relation to ſome rule, or meaſure, from its conformity to which it receives the above-mentioned denomination.

If it be aſked what this rule, or meaſure is, or what the end, from their tendency to which actions receive the denomination of right or good—I know not of a more juſt or rational anſwer than this, that it is *natural good*, or *happineſs*. Nor can I conceive, that the founding of moral obligation in utility, is of that dangerous tendency, with reſpect to the intereſts of virtue, which ſome have apprehended. What is there of danger in the ſuppoſition, that utility, as viewed by the omniſcient Being, is the rule of his requiſitions and laws, and, in this ſenſe, the ground of the diſtinction between right and wrong. And, unleſs we widely miſapprehend the doctrine of which we are ſpeaking, we ſhall, by no means, admit that our ideas of what may be, in the event, productive of good, ought ever to ſuperſede the commands of the Supreme Lawgiver, when they are explicitly given;

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when they are known, or believed to be his. But they, who enjoy only natural religion, are unacquainted with any explicit commands or prohibitions, to point out the divine will unto them. I aſk then, if it is acknowledged that our feelings, or the moral ſenſe, ought to be aſſiſted, and, in ſome inſtances controlled, by reaſon, in determining what the will of the Lord is, why may not reaſon itſelf be aſſiſted by the clue, which the doctrine of utility furniſhes? It may not, however, be amiſs further to guard againſt miſconceptions, and the apprehended danger. Without attempting to decide the queſtion, whether the true intereſt of individuals be, ever, inconſiſtent with the general good of the creation, I obſerve, that it is general, not particular, utility which we conſider as the ground of moral obligation. Our meaning is, that actions and modes of conduct, of a particular kind, are required of us becauſe they are, *on the whole*, beſt—or tend to produce happineſs.

I obſerve further, that it is the tendency, not the eventual effect, of our conduct, which gives it the denomination of good, or evil. When inquiring with reſpect to the lawfulneſs of my doing, in particular circumſtances, an action, which reaſon repreſents as falling under a general prohibition, the queſtion is not, whether evil, either to myſelf or others, will actually be the conſequence of my doing it, but whether evil would not be the effect of the univerſal toleration of ſimilar actions. I only add the query, whether we can ever be certain, that our doing what reaſon, and the moral ſenſe, teach us is generally prohibited, or neglecting that which they repreſent as generally required, will not eventually be, in one way or another, productive of evil?

Having made the foregoing obſervation, relative to the foundation of religion, the moral faculties with which man is endowed, and the grounds of moral obligation—I proceed to attempt ſhewing that man-

kind are, not only prediſpoſed by their nature, to ſeek God, but that it is poſſible for them to find him, by properly obſerving, and reaſoning upon, his works and ways. In defining natural religion, I repreſented it as conſiſting in ſo much acquaintance with God, our duty, and our deſtination, as might be acquired, in the proper uſe of our rational faculties, without any direct aſſiſtance from ſupernatural revelations. I ſay, *direct* aſſiſtance, becauſe it is impoſſible to tell how much of that knowledge of the Supreme Being, which the heathen nations are, or have been poſſeſſed of, was derived from tradition, or deſcended to them, though broken and confuſed in the paſſage, from thoſe revelations which, we have reaſon to ſuppoſe, were made to men, in the early ages of the world; or from ſome acquaintance with thoſe favoured nations, to whom revelation has been more freely imparted, in later times.

I know not of any abſurdity in ſuppoſing that the Creator ſhould make himſelf known—I mean, give the firſt proper knowledge of himſelf, to an intelligent creature, by revelation. That he *can* thus make himſelf known, we ſhall not deny, without derogating from his infinite power. We do not know that the firſt man was left to his own reaſonings, merely, to diſcover his Maker. The hiſtory of his creation would lead us, rather, to ſuppoſe that he was not; but was made acquainted with the Creator, in a manner more ſpeedy and direct; by ſuch manifeſtations, appearances, or revelations, as ſupplied the place of a chain of reaſoning, or deductions from what he felt and ſaw. It has, even, been doubted, and not without the appearance of reaſon, whether the exiſtence of God ever was, in fact, diſcovered to any of mankind, by the light of nature, alone, or unaſſiſted, in any degree, either directly or indirectly, by revelation. This queſtion, however, regards a matter of fact; and does not determine what men might do, without

without any ſupernatural aſſiſtance. The doubt abovementioned does not ſuggeſt that they, who are not favoured with revelation, in the ſame ſenſe in which we are, neither have, nor could have the knowledge of God; that he has not manifeſted himſelf, by his works, in ſuch a manner, and to ſuch a degree, that they might, by a proper uſe and improvement of their rational powers, become convinced of his being and perfections; or that they are not inexcuſable in their ignorance of him.

Might they not, by ſuch arguments as the following, arrive at the concluſion that there is a God,—the eternal cauſe of all things; a being of unbounded perfections; the creator, preſerver, and moral governour of the world? When they look around them, and ſee ſuch a variety of objects as, at once, preſent themſelves to their view, is not the concluſion obvious and natural, that there is ſome cauſe of their exiſtence, and of their being what they are? Did they produce themſelves? This immediately ſtrikes the mind as an abſurdity. We feel as certain that mere nothing cannot produce any real being, as we do of our own exiſtence. Something, then, muſt have exiſted from eternity, or elſe no being could have exiſted at all. For that which was not from eternity muſt have had a beginning; and whatever had a beginning muſt have been produced by ſomething elſe. That ſomething now exiſts, is, therefore, a proof of the exiſtence of an eternal cauſe. When we have arrived at the concluſion, that ſomething muſt have exiſted from eternity, a ſecond concluſion is, ſcarcely, leſs obvious than the firſt,—that what has thus exiſted from eternity, muſt be a thinking or intelligent being; ſince it is as impoſſible to conceive that unthinking mattter ſhould produce a thinking being, as that *nothing* ſhould produce matter.

To this reaſoning what can the atheiſt, with any degree of plauſibility, oppoſe, unleſs it be, that the advocates

vocates for a God, no leſs than he, are obliged to admit that ſomething exiſts without a cauſe; or in other words, which is not an effect; and that, while he attributes this mode of exiſtence to the univerſe, we only remove the difficulty further back, without diminiſhing it at all, when we aſcribe ſuch neceſſary exiſtence to a ſingle being, the ſuppoſed cauſe of all beſides himſelf. But if there be a ſpark of ingenuouſneſs remaining in the atheiſt's mind, I may, with confidence, appeal to that, whether there be not leſs difficulty in conceiving that neceſſary exiſtence ſhould be attached to a ſingle being, ſpiritual, uncompounded, indiviſible, and unchangeable, than to thouſands of beings, of various kinds, material, heterogeneous, and perpetually changing.

But granting the difficulty, in our view of it, to be as great on the former ſuppoſition, as on the latter; and even admitting, what we are under no neceſſity of doing, that the matter of the univerſe was eternal, ſtill the admirable contrivance, reſpect to certain ends, and ſuitableneſs of one thing to another, which we, on every ſide, behold in the works of nature, afford ſatisfactory evidence that theſe works, as they now appear, are the production of an intelligent mind. Contrivance implies a contriver. And wiſe arrangement clearly betokens a wiſe author of ſuch arrangement. This argument is forcibly, and conciſely expreſſed by the Pſalmiſt. "He that formed the eye, ſhall not he ſee? He that planted the ear, ſhall not he hear? He that teacheth man knowledge, ſhall not he know?" The farther we puſh our diſcoveries in the works of nature, the more ſtrongly will ſuch ideas, as are ſuggeſted in the above queſtions, force themſelves upon our minds; and the more inſtances we ſhall ſee of admirable ſkill and contrivance in the formation, and connexion of thoſe works.

If we are once perſuaded that ſuch a being as God, with ſuch attributes as we moſt naturally aſcribe to the

the intelligent cauſe of all things, really exiſts, can we entertain a doubt whether he exerciſe thoſe attributes, in making proviſion for the happineſs of his various creatures; or whether he be the moral governour of the world? It is, indeed, from the exerciſe of his attributes, eſpecially, that we learn what they are. His power, wiſdom, and goodneſs are all viſible in his works and ways. The firſt is ſo legibly inſcribed on them, that we cannot avoid ſeeing it, wherever we turn our eyes; a ſmall degree of attention will bring to view convincing tokens of the ſecond; and, by conſidering the general tendency of the laws of nature, to produce happineſs, and obſerving that the evils which take place in the world are, juſtly, to be viewed as the incidental effect of the operation of thoſe laws, and not as reſulting from their general tendency, or primary deſign,—we ſhall be ſafely led to the acknowledgment, and belief of the laſt.

But, as the goodneſs of the Deity is his peculiar glory; and as all his moral attributes may, not improperly, be reſolved into benevolence, it will not be amiſs to conſider, more particularly, the evidence which reaſon and nature furniſh, that this is, indeed, an eſſential part of the divine character.

It has been thought that a view of the works of creation, and, what believers call, the ways of providence, while it might convince us of the exalted wiſdom, and the mighty power of the Creator, would leave us in doubt with regard to his goodneſs; and could not lead us to a more agreeable concluſion than this, that he was a mixed character, partly good, and partly evil. But it may be aſked, if there were malevolence in the Deity, can it be ſuppoſed that malevolent deſign ſhould not, ſometimes, be plainly diſcernible in the laws of nature, or the conſtitution of the world? Yet, where is any ſuch deſign to be diſcovered? Where is the law of nature, the leading object of which appears to be the production of miſery?

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Who will ſay that the primary and principal deſign of the wind is to level the foreſts, to overturn our dwellings, or ſink the mariner, and his treaſures, in the deep; and not rather to cleanſe the air, to waft the clouds from place to place, that the bleſſing which they carry with them may be more extenſively diffuſed, and to promote the purpoſes of commerce, and thus increaſe the comforts and conveniences of life? Do we ſee the genuine intention of the rain of heaven in the devaſtation of a flood, or in its fertilizing effects, on the fruits of the earth? But, if the moſt terrible phenomena of nature,—the hail, the lightning, the hurricane, and the earthquake, could not be found to anſwer any valuable purpoſes in the natural world, yet reaſon, viewing the Deity as the moral governour of the univerſe, might eaſily conceive the propriety of ſuch a uſe of theſe inſtruments of divine chaſtiſement, as the ſcriptures ſuggeſt concerning one of them, when they repreſent it as "reſerved againſt the time of trouble, againſt the day of battle and war." We might rationally conſider them as deſigned to rouſe mankind to a juſt ſenſe of the power, and overruling providence of God; to inſpire them with awe of his majeſty, and teach them that the race is not, always, to the ſwift, nor the battle to the ſtrong. Neither are thoſe ſtorms, which the paſſions ſometimes raiſe in the human breaſt, any proof that the paſſions themſelves were not implanted there with a benevolent deſign, or that they are not calculated to anſwer purpoſes moſt friendly to the happineſs of man.

But, there is one argument, of the *priori* kind, which appears to be not leſs intelligible than convincing, in favour of the benevolence of the Deity; an argument deduced from his all-ſufficiency, and that perfection of nature which reaſon, ſo readily, aſcribes to the great firſt cauſe. If we conſider how many of our malevolent, or unfriendly feelings are, evidently,

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owing to bodily, or mental weakneſs; to an irritation of the ſpirits occaſioned by pain and ſuffering; to diſappointment; to conſcious inferiority; to diſſatisfaction with ourſelves; to injuries received from others, or to ſimilar cauſes, all of which may be reſolved into imperfection, or a defect of happineſs,—muſt we not conclude, that unmingled benevolence is an eſſential attribute of that Being, in whom none of theſe cauſes can operate; who knows no ſuperiour; who commandeth and it is done; whoſe power nothing can withſtand, and whoſe happineſs nothing can annoy?

If God is benevolent, he muſt be concerned for the welfare of his creatures. This attribute is as unchangeable as his being. His care for the works of his hands muſt, therefore, be unremitted. It cannot be, reaſonably, ſuppoſed that he ſhould forſake the world, which he has made; or that he ſhould not exerciſe a paternal, wiſe, and righteous providence over it. The doctrine which would exclude the Deity from the affairs of men; which ſuppoſes him too great, or too much occupied by his own happineſs, to concern himſelf with the wants, or to take notice of the characters, of his intelligent offspring, is nearly related to atheiſm; and, with regard to practical influence, is little better than the denial of his exiſtence.

Righteouſneſs, or juſtice, is not inconſiſtent with goodneſs, but is, in reality, a modification of it. He, therefore, who is infinite in benevolence, will rule in righteouſneſs and equity. He will render, unto all the ſubjects of his moral government, according to their works. He will, from regard to the general happineſs of his extenſive empire, make a diſtinction between the righteous and the wicked; between thoſe who ſerve him, and thoſe who ſerve him not. It is the language of reaſon, as well as of ſcripture, that *the righteous Lord loveth righteouſneſs*; that *his eye*

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is upon them that fear him, upon them that hope in his mercy; and that *his face is againſt them that do evil.* Our own feelings teach us to expect that he ſhould approve, and love, his own image, in his children; that virtue and holineſs ſhould recommend them to his favour, and the oppoſites of theſe render them the objects of his diſpleaſure. When they do that which their conſciences diſapprove, and reaſon repreſents as contrary to his will, they are ſenſible of ſtanding guilty and condemned before him; they feel their ill deſert, and nature ſuggeſts to their fears a judgment to come.

On the other hand, if their hearts condemn them not, then have they confidence towards God. They hope for his ſalvation, while they do his commandments. Nature and reaſon whiſper peace to their minds, and bid them believe, that if they walk uprightly, they will walk ſecurely; that their Maker will continue to be their father, and their friend; that he will never forſake them, and that even death will not be able to ſeparate them from his love.

In addition to the peaceful ſenſations, and the pleaſing hopes of virtue, with the ſelf-condemnation, and the gloomy fears of vice, thoſe natural advantages of the one, and diſadvantages of the other, which appear to be their general conſequences, reſpectively, in the preſent ſtate, furniſh a ſtrong intimation that a righteous moral government is begun, and progreſſing, in the world; clearly indicate that the Deity is a friend to virtue, and an enemy to vice, and tend to confirm the hopes of the righteous, and the fears of the wicked, relative to a future ſtate, of more equal retribution than the preſent life.

I mean not to enter, particularly, into thoſe reaſonings which might be, and often have been, made uſe of to prove a future ſtate of exiſtence, independently of revelation; or to point out all the ways in which nature has ſuggeſted immortality to man. I obſerve,

obſerve, however, as a proof of the reality of ſuch ſuggeſtions, that mankind, in all ages, and under all degrees of mental improvement, have generally, if not univerſally, entertained ſome idea of a life to come. Whether this idea were, at firſt, ſuggeſted by reaſoning on the conſtitution of man, and the conduct of providence; whether it be the voice of nature within him, or be derived from tradition, founded originally on revelation, it may ſtill be conſidered as a dictate of natural religion, according to that definition of it which has been given in this diſcourſe.

It is confeſſed that there are difficulties, of ſome importance, which lie in the way of reaſoning out, ſatisfactorily, the doctrine of a future ſtate. To mention only one,—appearances are ſtrongly againſt it. What is there in a breathleſs corpſe to ſuggeſt the hope that it ſhould ever riſe to ſecond life? "There is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will ſprout again, and that the tender branch thereof will not ceaſe; but man dieth and waſteth away; yea, man giveth up the ghoſt, and where is he?" However, the impartial juſtice of the Supreme Being, which reaſon views as an eſſential part of his character, affords an argument, of weight, in favour of a future life. Although the Deity appears, from the conſtitution of the world, and the courſe of his providence, to be a friend of virtue, it is, by no means, manifeſt that, in this life, he makes all the difference between the virtuous and the vicious, with regard to their happineſs, which ſubſiſts between their moral characters, or which his love of righteouſneſs, and his impartial juſtice, would lead us to expect. On this argument, therefore, reaſon reſts, with peculiar confidence, when indulging the hope, that death will not end our exiſtence, and that the righteous will find God their friend and portion forever.

Were I now to attempt ſhewing, particularly, how reaſon might trace out our obligation to the various

perſonal, ſocial, and religious virtues,—deducing it from our nature, our relations to each other, and to God, and from the fitneſſes and tendencies of things, —I ſhould ſwell this diſcourſe to a very unreaſonable length, if I did not deviate from its principal deſign. I proceed, therefore, to obſerve that we ought not to be ſurpriſed, though the actual religious ſtate of that part of mankind, who have not enjoyed any direct aſſiſtance from revelation, ſhould not appear fully to correſpond with the repreſentation, above given, of what reaſon might, poſſibly, inveſtigate. For,

There is ſuch a degree of difficulty attending the inveſtigation, and ſo much darkneſs ſurrounding the ſubject, as to leave it doubtful whether they would, generally, purſue it to a ſucceſsful iſſue. This, I have ſaid, appears to be implied in the manner of expreſſion made uſe of by the apoſtle, in the text. "If, haply, they might feel after him, and find him." The idea of groping in darkneſs is here ſuggeſted. The poſſibility of finding God, by the contemplation of his works, is alſo implied. But, from what they might do, cannot, with certainty, be inferred, what they would do. And the fact is, that the world, by wiſdom, knew not God; or they did not retain him in their knowledge; though the inviſible things of him, from the creation of the world, are clearly ſeen, or might be underſtood, by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead.

That the generality of the heathen, (I might ſay of mankind at large,) ſhould not go ſo far, in the inveſtigation of religious truth, as the power of reaſon, and a due attention to the works and ways of God, would carry them, will not be difficult to conceive, if we conſider that the neceſſary employments of the bulk of mankind preclude them from the ability, and taſte, as well as from leiſure, for purſuing the more abſtract and difficult kinds of inquiries. They muſt, and will, depend rather on the inſtruc-

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tions which they receive from others, than on their own reaſonings. If they, among the Gentiles, who enjoyed happier opportunities for the purſuit of religious knowledge, had generally made the beſt uſe of their own reaſon; had not been perverted by pride or prejudice, and had communicated the reſult of their inquiries, to the multitude of their brethren, with a degree of zeal and perſeverance, ſuited to the importance of the ſubject, ſtill we might hope to find the heathen world, in general, poſſeſſed of tolerably juſt ideas of God and their duty. But, can it be ſaid that either of the above ſuppoſitions is true? For, is it not the leaders of the people; the men of influence and power; the more inquiſitive, and better informed, among the heathen, whom the apoſtle has, eſpecially in view, when he ſays, that *profeſſing themſelves to be wiſe, they became fools?* Even they who were, by way of eminence, ſtyled their wiſe men appear, not only to have made important miſtakes with regard to morals, but, whatever they might themſelves believe concerning the nature of the Deity, to have countenanced, rather than diſcouraged, the worſhip of a plurality of Gods. And, of how little avail, towards general inſtruction and reformation, were the ſchools they taught, compared with, what they called, *the fooliſhneſs of preaching*, under our Maſter from heaven; and thoſe chriſtian inſtitutions, to the benefit of which all ages, and all claſſes of men, are admitted; eſpecially as the former were enforced only by human reaſonings, the latter by the authority of God? Ought it not to be further conſidered, that the darkneſs, in which the later heathen were involved, was owing, not only to their own degeneracy and vices, but to the accumulated moral corruptions, and errors, (a ſad inheritance!) which deſcended to them from their forefathers? Pride, prejudice, and vice, together with the ſanctioning influence of time, conſpired, more and more, to obſcure the knowledge

knowledge of God, and the truths of natural religion, as men were further removed from the period when this obſcuration began. Be the original powers of human reaſon, therefore, what they may; and the guilt of thoſe, who firſt corrupted the purity of natural religion, and changed the truth of God into a lie, ever ſo great, ſome compaſſionate allowance ſeems to be due to them, who had ſuch difficulties, as thoſe juſt mentioned, to encounter, in their reſearches after religious truth. And this, among other things, is, perhaps, intimated by the apoſtle, when he ſays,—"the times of this ignorance God winked at." This ignorance itſelf was, at leaſt, a reaſon which, we may ſuppoſe, prompted the Father of Mercies to introduce that diſpenſation in which he, emphatically, *commandeth all men, every where, to repent.* Certain it is, that the actual ſtate of the world, prior to Chriſtianity, rendered ſuch a diſpenſation highly deſirable. It was felt to be ſo by ſome of the wiſeſt among the heathen. Nor can the religion of nature, if viewed in a juſt light, and placed in its proper rank, ſtand, at all, in the way of our faith in revelation. But, on the other hand, the more carefully we examine the former, the more fully ſhall we be convinced of the importance and expediency of thoſe communications which God has been pleaſed, more directly, to make concerning himſelf, our duty and our deſtination. This conviction will be more deeply impreſſed, if we conſider that the religion of nature does not afford full ſatisfaction, in the anſwer that it gives to a queſtion, which is of great importance to ſinners; and which the penitent ſinner will aſk with great ſolicitude. How ſhall the guilty,—how ſhall they who are condemned, by God, and their own conſciences, regain the divine favour? Will repentance and amendment ſecure them forgiveneſs, and place them in as hopeful a ſituation as that in which they ſtood before they offended? It is the language of reaſon, that

theſe are the beſt reparation, that we can make, for the evil which we have done by our diſobedience; but it does not declare that the reparation is complete. Repentance is next, in value, to obedience; but it is not the ſame thing. Reaſon teaches us, that God is good; it teaches us alſo, that he is juſt. Although, therefore, we may, rationally, conclude that the hopes of a true penitent, left to the light of nature for his guide, would riſe above his fears,—yet, that there would be a painful degree of uncertainty, on this ſubject, we may not deny; nor can we, with reaſon, deny, that it muſt be of great importance to have this uncertainty removed, by an expreſs declaration from HIM to whom forgiveneſs belongeth.

If it be aſked,—wherefore then ſerveth natural religion? I anſwer, that, conſidered as both ſpeculative and practical, it is the guide, and the way, to happineſs, unto thoſe who are denied the privilege of acquaintance with revelation. In it we ſee the truth of the Apoſtle's aſſertion, that *God hath never left himſelf without witneſs;* and an evidence, that he has always made ſuch proviſion for the inſtruction of mankind, in moral and religious truth, that they have, in no age of the world, been, *neceſſarily*, deſtitute of the knowledge of their Maker, or the means of obtaining his favour. While, by examining this ſubject, we are taught what natural religion might be, we are conſtrained to acknowledge, that God is good to all his rational offspring, here below. And, from ſeeing what the actual ſtate of religion is, among the nations unenlightened by the direct rays of revelation, we are furniſhed with ſtronger motives to gratitude for the divine goodneſs to us, in cauſing the Sun of Righteouſneſs to ariſe upon us, and giving that aid to our reaſon, which revealed religion affords. Whatever diſcoveries mankind might make, by the light of nature, in their reſearches after the

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moſt intereſting truths,—ſtill there is abundant reaſon for our aſſent to our Saviour's declaration,—"Bleſſed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it." If men might, by a proper uſe of their rational powers, and natural advantages, find out God, and ſecure his favour, it by no means follows from this, that they may not riſe higher, in moral excellence, and, conſequently, in future happineſs, than would be otherwiſe poſſible,—by means of a practical acquaintance with ſuch a religion as Chriſtianity.

Natural religion lies in the foundation of revealed. Men would be but ill prepared to receive a revelation from God, if they had no idea that ſuch a being exiſted. But it would be abſurd to conſider the Deity's having imparted one important favour to his children, as a reaſon why he ſhould not beſtow another; eſpecially, if their circumſtances and wants ſtrongly pleaded for its beſtowment.

Permit me to add, agreeably to what has been ſuggeſted already, that if it is probable, there would not have been ſo much natural religion in the world, as there is, or ſo juſt ideas of God and duty, as are to be found, among the unenlightened nations, had it not been for thoſe revelations which have been imparted, in different ages,—then, here is another reaſon againſt oppoſing the religion of nature to that of revelation, and repreſenting the latter as rendered unneceſſary, or undeſirable, by the former. With regard to the ableſt oppoſers of revealed religion, in chriſtian countries, little doubt can be, juſtly, entertained of their reaſon being improved by the revelation which they oppoſe; or of their being thus enabled to argue, more plauſibly, in favour of the ſufficiency of natural religion. How unwiſe, to undermine the foundation on which they ſtand! How diſingenuous, and ungrateful, to attempt deſtroying Chriſtianity, with thoſe weapons which, for widely different purpoſes, it has, generouſly, put into their hands!

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If the enemies of revealed religion deſerve the epithets *unwiſe*, *diſingenuous*, and *ungrateful*,—what do not they deſerve who impiouſly ſtrike at the root of all religion, the being of a God? Surely, the wiſe king did not ſtigmatize them too ſeverely, when he called them *fools*. To deny the exiſtence of a God, indicates a ſtrange abuſe of reaſon, and perverſion, if not weakneſs, of the mental powers. But, it is the worſt of folly, in another view; as conſidered in relation to the happineſs of intelligent beings. What darkneſs, what a melancholy gloom, muſt it ſpread over the whole face of nature, to exclude, even in imagination, the agency and preſence of the all-governing Deity! To a variety of evils human life is expoſed. Many diſagreeable and painful things we are all obliged to ſuffer. But, in the belief of an almighty, and all-perfect God, and of his wiſe and univerſal providence, the mind experiences comfort and relief. For, we naturally argue, that whatever ſuch a being has ordained, muſt be right. We recollect that he, who is our Heavenly Father, may chaſten his children for their profit; and eaſily perſuade ourſelves that, if they do their duty, he will, in ſome way, bring good out of the evils which they endure. If we believe in God's being, and character, we ſhall feel comparatively little difficulty, or anxiety, ariſing from a view of thoſe dark appearances, which preſent themſelves, in the courſe of events, and thoſe many things, that take place in the world, for which we are unable to account. The government of the Infinite Being muſt be perfect; and, while we ſee but a part, he ſees the whole. Theſe are conſiderations which afford a happy ſubſtitute for many laboured ſolutions, and unſatisfactory conjectures. But, exclude a Deity from the univerſe, theſe difficulties ſtill remain, while we are utterly at a loſs to fix on any foundation, upon which to attempt a ſolution of them. Our ſituation would be myſtery,

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without any clue to unravel it; night and darkneſs, unalleviated by the proſpect of returning day; vanity, vexation, and trouble, without the hope of any higher, happier ſtate to come.

Once more, by denying the exiſtence of a God, the atheiſt tempts his own fate; and expoſes himſelf to the righteous diſpleaſure of that almighty Being, whom he denies. He loſes one of the moſt powerful incentives to virtue, and reſtraints from vice; and the conſequence will, too naturally, be his yielding himſelf up to be governed by his own heart's luſts, and following all the irregular deſires of his mind. By his providence, as well as by his word, the Ruler of the world has taught the hardened worker of iniquity to tremble. Nor let him, who not merely forgets, but denies his God, hope to eſcape with impunity, becauſe his crimes owe their origin to the moſt inexcuſable of all infidelity. The reality of the divine exiſtence, or attributes, does not depend on human faith or unbelief. Whatever the fool may ſay, in his heart, or with his lips, *there is, verily, a God, who judgeth in the earth.*

The ſubject of this Lecture aſſumes a peculiar degree of importance, at the preſent day, when the foundations of natural, as well as revealed religion, are ſo boldly and virulently attacked, by an impious and atheiſtical philoſophy;—a philoſophy which would exalt *nature* to the throne of NATURE'S GOD; and which, under the pretence of deſtroying ſuperſtition, and freeing mankind from unreaſonable reſtraints, opens the flood-gates of the vileſt paſſions, and levels thoſe barriers, on which the ſecurity of ſocial order and happineſs, eſſentially, depends.

The Students of this Univerſity will permit the ſpeaker to indulge the pleaſing hope, that their own underſtandings, aided by the ſuperiour advantages, which they here enjoy, for acquiring ſcience, juſtly ſo called, will effectually ſecure them from the infec-

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tion of ſuch unphiloſophical, as well as pernicious, and deteſtable principles. For the ſakes of your parents and friends, who are watching you with the tenderest ſolicitude! for the ſake of ſociety, whoſe eyes are upon you, and whoſe fond anticipations are tracing you, from this ſeat of literature, through various ſcenes of public uſefulneſs and honour; and, eſpecially, for your own ſakes, and from a view to your perſonal happineſs, both here, and hereafter, be perſuaded, my young friends, to guard, with the utmoſt care, againſt admitting the fatal idea, that religion is a vain thing;—that it is either abſurd, diſhonourable, or unimportant. In the whole circle of the arts and ſciences, what can be more intereſting than the knowledge of our Maker, of our duty, and the way which, infallibly, leads to happineſs? What more important than the art of living in ſuch a manner as to ſecure the friendſhip of that Almighty Being, on whom we continually depend, and from whom all our bleſſings flow? If you feel apprehenſions that the charge of weakneſs, or abſurdity, may apply to the religious character, you are reminded, that ſome of the greateſt philoſophers, and brighteſt ornaments of human nature, have been men of religion. And, if you entertain the leaſt doubt as to the effects of diſcarding religious principle, on the peace and welfare of ſociety, you are requeſted to obſerve the ſucceſs of that experiment, which has been recently made, of founding an extenſive Republic, on a ſyſtem of atheiſm. But, without urging the allurement of great names, on the one hand, or the terror of alarming experience on the other, I will appeal to your underſtandings, and your feelings, in connexion, whether there be not a juſt foundation for religion, laid in the nature of man; whether the heavens do not declare the exiſtence, and glorious perfections of the Deity; whether the earth be not full of the evidences of his power, wiſdom, and goodneſs; whether he have not

ſhewed us, in the moſt important inſtances, even by the light of reaſon and nature, what is good, and what he requireth of us; whether we ought not to revere, to love, to worſhip, and obey, the God that made us,—the almighty Sovereign of the world,—the moſt amiable and excellent, as well the moſt powerful of all beings; whether the duties of piety, of juſtice, of veracity, of benevolence, of ſobriety, and temperance, do not clearly reſult from our nature and conſtitution, from our relation to him, and connexion with each other; whether we be not moral and accountable beings;—and whether the concluſion of Solomon be not moſt juſt and rational—"Fear God, and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man; for God will bring every work into judment, with every ſecret thing." I will carry the appeal further. Have you not, experimentally, found your faith in the being and providence of God, and, generally, in what are called the great truths of natural religion, more firm, and your views of them more clear and ſatisfactory, the more carefully you have attended to its duties, and the more faithfully you have obeyed its laws? If this be the caſe, how important is it that you ſhould be virtuous, that you may be truly wiſe; not only that you may, moſt effectually ſecure your final felicity, but that you may, to the beſt advantage, purſue your inquiries after the moſt valuable of all ſcience; and, indeed that you may keep your minds in the beſt preparation for acquiring every kind of uſeful knowledge. Vice is an eternal enemy to truth, as well as happineſs. Be entreated to guard, with the moſt vigilant attention, againſt every violation of the dictates of conſcience. Amidſt the diſtinguiſhed advantages which you enjoy for finding God by the ſtudy of his works, beware leſt, being led aſtray by youthful luſts, the light within you become obſcured; leſt there be in you an evil heart of unbelief; leſt you contract a fatal prejudice

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againſt the religion of Chriſt; a religion deſigned for ſinners,—and aſk your hearts whether it were not then deſigned for you; a religion which gives *aſſurance* of pardon to the penitent,—one of the great *deſiderata* in that of nature;—and which, by its ſuperiour motives and grace; by the new truths which it brings to view; and the new light which it ſheds on thoſe not wholly unknown before, is calculated to exalt human nature to its higheſt degree of perfection. The more juſt your ideas of natural religion, and the more conſonant your practice to the rules which it preſcribes, the nearer will you be to the kingdom of heaven; the better prepared to receive thoſe ſupernatural truths which Chriſtianity preſents to your minds. *He that hath heard, and learned of the Father, cometh unto Chriſt.* I conclude with the important, ſolemn, and affectionate advice of king David, to his ſon. "And thou, Solomon my ſon, know thou the God of thy father, and ſerve him with a perfect heart, and with a willing mind; for the Lord ſearcheth all hearts, and underſtandeth all the imaginations of the thoughts. If thou ſeek him, he will be found of thee; but, if thou forſake him, he will caſt thee off forever."

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